
The NYT's false claims about ethnic cleansing in Jaffa

Posted on [March 17, 2019](#) | [1 Comment](#)

A recent [article](#) in the *New York Times* (NYT) travel section described Jaffa as “Tel Aviv’s Unexpected Luxury Hotspot” and included several photos that should make everyone want to visit. Unsurprisingly, it also drew the ire of anti-Israel activists, who claimed the piece ignored Palestinians. The NYT responded to the resulting fury by revising the article and appending a contrite “Editors’ Note” that was promptly mocked. As leading anti-Israel activist Yousef Munayyer [put it](#): “Oops, we forgot Palestinians exist!”



(((YousefMunayyer)))
@YousefMunayyer

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Oops, we forgot Palestinians exist!

This has to be a [@NYTimes](#) correction for the ages.

Editors’ Note: March 14, 2019

The original version of this article, in focusing exclusively on the new high-end hotels and other additions, failed to touch on important aspects of Jaffa’s makeup and its history — in particular, the history and continuing presence of its Arab population and the expulsion of many residents in 1948. Because of this lapse, the article also did not acknowledge the continuing controversy about new development and its effect on Jaffa. After readers pointed out the problems, editors added some of that background information to this version.

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According to the editor’s note, the revision also included mentioning “the expulsion of many [Jaffa] residents in 1948.” Indeed, the article now includes a sentence that claims: “In 1948, when the State of Israel was founded, most of Jaffa’s Arab residents were forcibly removed from their homes.”

So I’m afraid another correction is necessary.

I wrote a [post](#) on Jaffa’s relevant history a few years ago in response to similarly false claims by veteran Israel-hater Ali Abunimah, who insisted that “Zionist gangs perpetrated the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian coastal city of Jaffa.”

When I researched the post, I found an *Al-Ahram* Special [from 1998](#) “commemorating 50 years of Arab dispossession since the creation of the State of Israel.” On pp.91-93 there is an eyewitness account covering the situation in Jaffa between late 1947 to May 1948 under the title “After the matriculation.” The author, Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, is a former resident of Jaffa with impeccable [anti-Zionist credentials](#) – which is to say he would have described in detail all the horrors if there was any truth to the NYT claim that “most of Jaffa’s Arab residents were forcibly removed from their homes.”

However, recalling his last months in his hometown, Abu-Lughod wrote:

“No sooner had the UN General Assembly passed its partition resolution in November 1947, than Palestine was torn apart by a war waged between its two historically antagonistic communities — Palestinian Arabs and Palestinian Jews. [...] The first shots were exchanged between Jaffa and Tel Aviv on the eve of 30 November 1947 during a three-day general protest strike declared by the Arab Higher Committee. [...] On the eve of the UN Partition Resolution, Jaffa’s Arab population numbered over 70,000. By and large they supported the traditional Palestinian leadership headed by Haj Amin Al-Husseini, the Grand Mufti.”

Understandably, Abu-Lughod, who was by then a professor of political science, didn’t mention the fact that the man who headed the popular “traditional Palestinian leadership” in the second half of the 1940s had spent the first half of the decade in Berlin, where he lived in considerable comfort as [a well-paid guest](#) and [committed ally of Nazi Germany](#). Indeed, a 1948 magazine article [described](#) Al-Husseini as “Hitler of the Holy Land.”

Abu-Lughod then goes on to note that most Arabs in Jaffa and elsewhere seemed confident that “as the country belonged to the Arabs, they were the ones who would defend their homeland with zeal and patriotism, which the Jews – being of many scattered countries and tongues, and moreover being divided into Ashkenazi and Sephardic – would inevitably lack. In short, there was a belief that the Jews were generally cowards.”

When this belief proved mistaken, people started to leave Jaffa. According to Abu-Lughod, at first mainly the rich left, but as more and more people began to flee the fighting, the “National Committee...decided to levy a tax on every family who insisted on leaving.” Abu-Lughod volunteered to help with collecting this “tax:”

“I worked in a branch of the committee based in the headquarters of the Muslim Youth Association near the port of Jaffa. Our job consisted mainly of harassing people to dissuade them from leaving, and when they insisted, we would begin bargaining over what they should pay, according to how much luggage they were carrying with them and how many members of the family there were. At first we set the taxes high. Then as the situation deteriorated, we reduced the rates, especially when our friends and relatives began to be among those leaving.

We continued collecting this tax until 23 April, when the combined force of the Haganah and the Irgun succeeded in defeating the Arab forces stationed in the Manshiya quarter adjacent to Southern Tel-Aviv. On that day, as we realised that an attack on the centre of Jaffa was imminent, I and my family decided that they had to be evacuated temporarily. We rented a van, into which we crammed all the women and young children and sent them to Nablus.”

Abu-Lughod himself stayed in Jaffa until May 3, when he left by ship together with two friends to make the short trip to Beirut. By July 1948, he was already back with his family in Nablus, from where he soon made his way to

the US to study and to build a successful career at Northwestern University. He left there in 1992 to become vice-president of Bir Zeit University in Ramallah.

As Abu-Lughod's account illustrates, the majority of Jaffa's Arab residents fled the fighting over a period of several weeks or even months – by land or by sea – while Jaffa's self-proclaimed defenders tried to exploit those who wanted to leave by demanding a "tax."

An additional point that is very relevant in this context is the fact that in the decades before Israel's establishment, lots of [Arab migrant workers](#) were recruited from all over the region to build major infrastructure projects; in addition, there were legal and illegal Arab migrants who came to take advantage of "the relative economic boom, stimulated by the annual Jewish immigration beginning in 1882."



As the 1937 report by the British Peel Commission put it:

"The increase in the Arab population is most marked in urban areas, affected by Jewish development. A comparison of the census returns in 1922 and 1931 shows that [...] the increase percent in Haifa was 86, in Jaffa 62, in Jerusalem 37, while in purely Arab towns such as Nablus and Hebron it was only 7, and at Gaza there was a decrease of 2 percent."

That means that, due to "the substantial 1880-1947 Arab immigration [...] the Arab population of Jaffa, Haifa and Ramla grew 17, 12 and 5 times respectively."

So Jewish development brought a lot of Arabs to towns like Jaffa; indeed, as [Robert F. Kennedy](#) put it in a dispatch for the *Boston Post* after visiting Mandate Palestine in March 1948: "The Jews point with pride to the fact that over 500,000 Arabs in the 12 years between 1932 and 1944, came into Palestine to take advantage of living conditions existing in no other Arab state."

As a result, it's reasonable to assume that many of the Arabs who fled Jaffa and other major towns during the fighting in 1947/48 simply returned to where they had originally come from.

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